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Archiving Qualitative Data in the Context of a Society Coming out of Conflict: Some Lessons from Northern Ireland

Dirk Schubotz, Martin Melaugh & Peter McLoughlin

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Abstract: ARK (Access Research Knowledge) was set up with a single goal: to make social science information on Northern Ireland available to the widest possible audience. The most well-known and widely used part of the ARK resource is CAIN (Conflict Archive on the INternet), which is one of the largest on-line collections of source material and information and about the Northern Ireland conflict.

The compilation of CAIN's new *Remembering: Victims, Survivors and Commemoration* section raised issues related to the sensitivity of the material, as it feeds into the fundamental debate on the legacy of the Northern Ireland conflict. It also fundamentally raises the question to what extent archiving is a neutral or political activity and necessitates a discourse on responsibility and ethics among social researchers. Experiences from the establishment of the Northern Ireland Qualitative Archive (NIQA) shed light on future possibilities with regard to qualitative archives on the Northern Ireland conflict.

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1. Introduction

In 2000, a small multidisciplinary team of social researchers from Queen's University and the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland set up [ARK](#). The single goal of ARK is to make social and political information on Northern Ireland available to the widest possible audience. Whilst one of ARK's core activities is to undertake empirical research—predominantly annual attitude surveys, but occasionally also qualitative research projects—the main emphasis has always been on the development of ARK as an open access on-line resource which provides comprehensive information about Northern Ireland to a multitude of

users: academics and students; journalists; policy makers; politicians and government—basically everyone with an interest in any aspect of Northern Irish society. Thus archiving has been one of the core activities of the ARK team since the initiative's inauguration. [1]

Most of the ARK activities raise little contention, for example:

1. Archiving of anonymized survey data and sharing it for secondary data analysis is now seen as good practice. ARK has been doing this ever since it has undertaken social attitude surveys in Northern Ireland (see <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt>) and has been a keen promoter of this practice of sharing.
2. Providing freely accessible summaries of research publications on Northern Ireland in an [Online Research Bank](#) (ORB) may disgruntle some university lecturers who may feel that this service could encourage their students to engage even less with academic research and literature. However, ORB is also highly regarded, for example among policy makers who want to gain an overview of available research evidence on a subject matter of relevance to them.
3. ARK hosts an [Election](#) site, which holds information—including a detailed breakdown of results—about elections held in Northern Ireland since 1885, and information on the respective voting systems used. [2]

However, given the highly contested nature of the conflict in Northern Ireland, almost every aspect of the work of CAIN, which is by far the most widely used part of the resources on ARK, has the potential to upset some individuals, groups, or organizations in the region. [3]

2. CAIN

The CAIN project began in 1996 and its website was first made available on-line in March 1997. CAIN was one of ARK's two core activities when it was founded, the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey being the other one. CAIN's purpose is to provide a wide range of information and source material on the Northern Ireland conflict and politics in the region as well as general information on Northern Ireland society from 1968 to the present. CAIN has been described as "the definitive website" for information on the conflict (MERRETT & GRIMWOOD, 2001). Materials available on CAIN include: bibliographies, databases, extracts from publications, background essays, literature lists, ephemera material, public records, detailed information about key events and people who played significant roles during Northern Ireland's recent history; to name but a few. CAIN also provides original ethnographic material such as photographs of political wall murals, posters, physical memorials, parades and marches, and some key historical events including, for example, a unique collection of color photographs taken on the day that became known as "Bloody Sunday." [4]

In this article we discuss one of the most recent significant additions to the CAIN website, namely the section on [Remembering: Victims, Survivors and Commemoration](#). This section contains detailed information about those killed during the Northern Ireland conflict, such as the location and the circumstances of their death, cross references to any memorials that are dedicated to their death and, if available, a photograph of the victim. Whilst the CAIN team has in the past sometimes received disapproving comments about the content of its website and the way this content is placed or presented—for example about seemingly insignificant matters such as the use of the name "Derry" instead of the official title of "Londonderry," but also more substantial criticisms about the criteria for the inclusion of names in [Malcolm Sutton's Index of Deaths](#)—no other addition to CAIN before had been awaited with such nervous anticipation as the section on *Victims, Survivors and Commemoration*. This is a reminder that the role of the archivist in Northern Ireland itself is political and therefore contested as it operates in the context of the Northern Ireland conflict and the segregated Northern Irish society. [5]

The aim of this article is to reflect on the archiving of contentious material as a "political" activity and discuss some of the dilemmas and consequences of this. We then briefly relate to our experiences of creating NIQA—the Northern Ireland Qualitative Archive—and discuss how these experiences can inform further archival work including potential work on ARK and on CAIN in particular. [6]

3. Principal Concerns Related to Archiving Qualitative Data

The debate on the merits and consequences of archiving qualitative social research data has gathered considerable speed over the past decade and *FQS* has taken up this issue since its very beginning. In fact, in the first year of its existence, the third issue of *FQS* was dedicated to the topic of archiving qualitative research data. In that issue CORTI (2000) reported about the establishment of Qualidata and some connected technical solutions of archiving data. Together with colleagues, CORTI also addressed the question of confidentiality and informed consent with respect to the archiving of qualitative research data (CORTI, DAY & BLACKHOUSE, 2000) as well as the issues related to the archiving of socio-medical case records (CORTI & AHMAD, 2000). In the same issue LEH (2000) and ORSATTI (2000) discussed some problems connected to the archiving of ethnographic material from oral history projects. In the same vein, FINK (2000) reported on some of the qualitative researchers' reservations about the archiving of their data. [7]

Since then, technical solutions of archiving qualitative data have improved and diversified (CORTI & BACKHOUSE, 2005) and attitudes among social researchers to the archiving of qualitative empirical data have become overall more favorable. For example, in 2005, JOYE argued that, principally, the documentation of the data collection process and archiving of data should be part of good practice in both quantitative *and* qualitative enquiry. In the UK, data archiving and sharing is increasingly not just seen as good research practice, but enforced by funders of social research. The largest funder of social research, the

Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), as well as large Foundations, such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Nuffield Foundation, require funded researchers not just to develop meaningful dissemination strategies for their findings, but also place a mandatory condition on grant holders to make data collected available for secondary analysis by archiving it appropriately. However, the principal ethical concerns about archiving remain. These are often related to issues about confidentiality and concerns about agreements made with participants at the time of fieldwork, as CORTI et al. (2000) pointed out. As well as that, issues raised by FINK (2000) about the complexity of qualitative research data and their subsequent fears about the usability for secondary analysis persist. It therefore remains the case that some researchers "will be inclined to cling to [their] data and resist archiving" (p.45). [8]

CAIN and ARK deal with a different kind of data and a different kind of complexity when dealing with the archiving of qualitative data. PARRY and MAUTHNER (2004) usefully distinguish between archiving for the purpose of oral history projects and the archiving of qualitative data for theory building in the social sciences. They argue that "oral historians are the only qualitative researchers who archive their data as a matter of course" (p.148). CAIN is very much a project concerned with historical records rather than empirically collected and produced social science data. However, PARRY and MAUTHNER also claim in their article that only "where qualitative data are valued over and above their utility as an historical record that the future exploitation of these data is rendered problematic" (ibid). We are making the point here that in a segregated and divided society which has been affected by a violent conflict, archiving of historical personal documents itself can *per se* become a contentious and political activity. [9]

4. Establishing an Archive of "Remembering": Victims, Survivors and Commemoration in Northern Ireland

Archives are often seen as places where "objective" and factual information can be accessed; and, to a certain extent, they certainly provide records of events that evidently occurred and descriptions of and opinions about these events (for example a record of newspaper articles related to events; interpretations of events, for example in books, in journal articles or in collections of oral history). Although contentiousness can arise from the actual recording of particular events, it more often occurs from the interpretation placed on the factual events and the context in which these are presented. [10]

In the case of Northern Ireland's divided society, the two main communities—Catholic/Nationalist/Republican/Irish and Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist/British—do not share the same views about the origins of the Northern Ireland conflict nor about many of the key events during "the Troubles," and therefore have different opinions about victimhood. The fact that people died in Northern Ireland as a consequence of the conflict is not denied by either of the conflict parties (CAIRNS & MALLETT, 2003). However, within the context of contested history about "the Troubles," an archive of documents related to the conflict—regardless of how

factual and sober these are presented—is likely to cause debates which reflect the division of the Northern Irish society itself. In such a climate, the term "victim" itself becomes value-laden. Consequently a registry that places **all** those who died, as a direct consequence of the violence related to the Northern Ireland conflict, in the same repository, and therefore rejects the notion of a hierarchy among victims and survivors, must cause tension, especially among those directly affected by the events of "the Troubles." As McDOWELL (2007) pointed out, "both Loyalist and Republican paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland have used the status of 'victim' to justify acts of violence and see the other as the perpetrators of their suffering" (p.1). The same can be said about the relation between Republican paramilitaries and the armed forces, such as the police and the army who have also suffered and caused death at the hands of each other. [11]

McDOWELL argues further that whilst the victim debate has been going on for over thirty years, it has gained importance with the Northern Ireland Peace Process and the establishment of the devolved Northern Ireland government, in which those at opposing ends of the political spectrum in Northern Ireland are obliged to share power. It is McDOWELL's view that the dichotomy of victim and perpetrator fails to consider the complexities of victimhood in post-conflict societies, which includes the possibility that some people can be seen as both victims and perpetrators. The author rightly points to the relationship between the construction of victimhood and collective identity. [12]

Statistics from the NILT survey show that, overall, nearly one quarter (24 percent) of respondents identified themselves as victims of "the Troubles" (ARK, 2005). Protestants (26 percent) were more likely to see themselves as victims than Catholics (21 percent) and those without religion (18 percent). Controversially, in the same survey Protestants (19 percent) were much less likely to agree than Catholics (34 percent) and those without religion (27 percent) that a Truth Commission would help make Northern Ireland a more peaceful and less divided society in years to come. Such a Truth Commission would of course have to address the issue of victimhood in Northern Ireland, but it is clear from the attitude surveys undertaken that only a minority of people would support such a debate, perhaps questioning if such a commission would ever get to "the truth" and if there are not better ways to deal with the legacy of the conflict, for example by providing support for the victims, or by a "story-telling" process (LUNDY & McGOVERN, 2006). So, currently it remains the case that different victims groups represent different "types" of victims "all of which display very different understandings and perceptions of what constitutes a victim" (McDOWELL, 2007, p.4). [13]

So what was the purpose of establishing such an archive of victims within CAIN and what are the ethical implications for a qualitative archive of this kind? [14]

Advocates of the peace process can point to many hard won achievements: the ceasefires; the Good Friday Agreement and the outcome of the referendum on the Agreement; the ending of the Provisional IRA's armed campaign; the establishment of a power-sharing Executive; the eventual completion of

decommissioning by the major paramilitary groups; etc. Despite the achievements there remains potential for further conflict. The question over the constitutional position of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom is only in abeyance and depends on the outcome of future referendum on the matter. It is clear to many that there has been little true reconciliation between significant sections of the two main communities in Northern Ireland. While the worst of "the Troubles" has ended, there remains a background of low-level sectarian intimidation and violence—punctuated by occasional killings. And, alongside the uneasy peace that has existed, looms one of the biggest unsolved problems of the post-conflict period—the issue of victims, survivors and commemoration. It was a recognition of the importance of victims issues to the future of the region that it was decided to attempt to try to secure funding to compile an archive of digital materials related to victims, survivors and commemoration. Following funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) the new archive was made available on 16 June 2009. [15]

The archive now comprises, for example, copies of reports, chapters from books, booklets, pamphlets, leaflets, policy documents, press releases, statements, text of speeches, media items, and photographs. These materials were produced by a range of organizations and individuals including British and Irish government departments and agencies, academic researchers, victims groups, other non-governmental organizations, and individuals. Additional information was generated by CAIN researchers during the lifetime of the project including text, databases and photographs. [16]

The information contained in the archive helps to document the developments that have occurred in Northern Ireland in the area of victims, survivors, and commemoration since 1997. In particular, it highlights the intense nature of the public debate that occurred during the time the research was being undertaken. The compilation of the archive involved dealing with a number of sensitivities. Some of the issues raised can be illustrated by looking at one particular part of the new archive that is the collection of photographs of those killed during the conflict. [17]

4.1 Photographs of the dead

Statistics reflect the scale of the conflict, and descriptions of individual killings provide some indication of the suffering involved. However, text-based information on its own lacks a "human face." In an effort to complement the existing textual information it was decided to compile a collection of photographs of those killed during the Northern Ireland conflict. This was something that researchers on CAIN had been considering for some time and were glad of the funding opportunity to undertake the necessary work. [18]

During the conflict photographs of those killed appeared regularly in print media and on television. Occasionally groups of photographs would be compiled, for example, for a poster entitled "Our Murdered Colleagues," produced by the RUC George Cross Foundation, which included photographs of 300 RUC officers killed

during the conflict. CAIN was able to establish that the main photographic agency in Northern Ireland did have a large collection of photographs in its files but these were only available at some considerable cost. However CAIN was unaware of a comprehensive set of photographs that was readily available on-line. [19]

As the work on this section was just part of a larger project it was not possible to attempt to achieve 100 per cent coverage. The initial target was set at 800 photographs. It was thought best to test the reaction to the proposed collection by making an initial tranche of images available. If there was no major adverse reaction to the collection then the aim would be to add a second tranche of images. During the research phase it proved possible to collect 1,425 images and these were made available in June 2009. This number represents 40.4 per cent of all those listed in Sutton's Index of Deaths. It is worth noting that it probably would not be possible at this stage to obtain a photograph for every person killed as a result of the conflict. In some cases the media did not obtain a photograph for a victim and given the passage of time it is highly likely that there would be a number of persons for whom no image will be forthcoming. However the CAIN team is committed to finding the resources to allow the second tranche of photographs to be added. Figure 1 gives an impression of photographs.



Figure 1: Photographs (reduced in size) of a selection of victims [20]

As part of the wider archive it proved possible to link the photographs of the people killed to information on physical monuments and memorials, placed in public spaces, which commemorate the dead. These memorials could either be "official" memorials, i.e. those funded or initiated by official agencies etc., or else grassroots or spontaneous memorials or shrines (SANTINO, 1992; SÁNCHEZ-CARRETERO, CEA, DÍAZ-MAS, MARTÍNEZ & ORTIZ, 2011), erected and looked after by local communities, and families of the victims. Photographs of these memorials are also provided in this CAIN section, alongside a description of the memorial and detailed information about its location, including map grid references. [21]

To give just one example, one of the most notorious events during the conflict was the Omagh bombing in which the *Real Irish Republican Army* (RIRA) planted and exploded a car bomb in the center of the market town Omagh which killed 29 civilians on 15th of August 1998. The victims of this bomb attack included Protestants and Catholics from Northern Ireland as well as visitors from the Republic of Ireland and from Spain. The CAIN website now provides photographic images of all those killed as well as pictures and details about the

Omagh Bomb Memorial Garden, the Omagh Bomb Monument and the Omagh Bomb Plaque; all of which remember those killed in the bomb (Figures 2-4).



Figure 2: Omagh Bomb Memorial Garden



Figure 3: Omagh Bomb Monument



Figure 4: Omagh Bomb Plaque [22]

The decision to make such a photographic archive of victims available was not taken lightly by the CAIN project team, and has raised some ethical issues due to a number of obvious sensitivities in dealing with such material. [23]

During the Northern Ireland conflict one aspect of the daily news reporting was the use of photographs of those who had been killed. Not everyone killed had a photograph in the media, but for the majority of deaths this was the case. Often the photograph did not appear on the day of the killing, or in the next day's media reports, but may have been used when the funeral took place and was reported. [24]

Although all of the photographs have been in the public domain for a long time, in many instances for decades, it was nevertheless important to be sensitive to the feelings of the family, relatives and friends of the deceased. It was impossible to speak to all family members in advance about the use of such photographs. In many cases the nearest family members themselves were deceased and other living relatives would be extremely difficult to trace. Those few who were contacted by CAIN in relation to a particular death were happy with the project proposal and granted permission for an existing, or different, photograph to be used. In some cases groups representing families of victims gave permission for photographs to be used, and one organization provided a set of photographs. [25]

One of the practical issues that arose during this project was the question of the copyright status of the photographic images. In the case of civilians, and also members of paramilitary groups, the photographs of the deceased were informal photographs which had obviously been taken by family members and friends. Many of these photographs had obviously been taken at social functions or family gatherings such as weddings. In the case of police officers the photographs were "official" ones which had been taken by a photographer employed by the

organization, whereas photographs of British soldiers were a mixture of official and unofficial images. [26]

The decision to collect and display the photographs on CAIN was based on the belief that although the photographs had first been made public by various media organizations, the copyright of the images did not rest with them but with the original, now unknown, photographer. So it was decided not to approach any media organizations or agencies directly, but to collect a cross-section of the photographs and make these available. This was done on the understanding that individual photographs would be removed from the CAIN website if any copyright holder, or nearest relative, objected to their use. [27]

It is clear then that this project operated in the tension between: the ambition of historical documentation, on the one hand; and contested interpretive authority about the Northern Ireland conflict in general and "victimhood" within this conflict in particular, on the other hand. Whilst disagreement about historical events and interpretations of these events are generally unproblematic for social scientists, as they naturally occur as a matter of their professional work, for ARK and CAIN as projects and archives that place themselves outside the "us-and-them" divide of the Northern Ireland conflict, the archiving of oral history data about the conflict poses subsequent challenges. In the following section of this article we allude to some of the potential challenges by looking at the [Northern Ireland Qualitative Archive](#) (NIQA), which was created by ARK considering the increasing understanding that qualitative social science data should also be made available for secondary research projects. [28]

5. NIQA—The Northern Ireland Qualitative Archive

NIQA was established by ARK in 2006. It consists of two sections: firstly, an online catalogue of qualitative research projects on the Northern Ireland conflict; and, secondly, an archive of video interview material and transcripts on ageism, generated during a small empirical research project undertaken by ARK in 2005-06. [29]

5.1 Qualitative archive on the conflict

First and foremost, NIQA was established in response to an existing gap, since, up to this point, ARK's archiving activities of social science research data had almost exclusively focused on large scale survey data. However, during the Northern Ireland conflict, a vast body of qualitative data had also been generated, but it was almost impossible to access this data for secondary analysis. There was no effective indexing or cataloging system available, and it seemed inevitable that some of the material would be lost. With the establishment of the Qualitative Archive on the Conflict, ARK attempted to address this issue by collating information about the qualitative data collected covering the time span of "the Troubles" in Northern Ireland into a single catalog. This was done by proactively approaching researchers who had undertaken such qualitative research projects. The catalog then lists information about these projects, including a general

description of the study content and methodology used, the period in which the research was undertaken, resulting research publications, the recording format of the data and their availability for secondary analysis, contact details of the researchers owning the data, etc. [30]

The catalog contains hundreds of records of qualitative research projects. Among the projects listed are groundbreaking projects such as the *Cost of the Troubles* study (SMYTH & FAY, 2000), who conducted 75 in-depth interviews with people affected by the Northern Ireland conflict. The authors also gathered information about, and links to, archives of material not initially collected for social research purposes, but of interest to social researchers. Say the BBC and Ulster Television (UTV) archives, which contains several hundred thousand items of film and interview material; or the Northern Ireland Film and Television Commission's Digital Film Archive, which contains audio-visual material relating to Northern Ireland from 1897 to the present. [31]

Some of the original data and materials are accessible and have indeed been archived elsewhere, whereas others will remain inaccessible for future research due to sensitivities attached. McLOUGHLIN and MILLER (2006), who were the two main ARK staff members involved in the establishment of this data catalog, recalled that many data holders in Northern Ireland felt unable to deposit politically sensitive data, for example recorded interviews with paramilitaries. [32]

The fact that Northern Ireland is such a small and closely knit society makes the task of anonymizing the referred data difficult, if not impossible in some instances. Even 15 years after the first cease fire, bringing sensitive information into the public can still endanger both informants (including their families and communities) and researchers. However, the NIQA catalog on the Northern Ireland conflict was created with the notion in mind "that at some stage, whether it is 10, 20, or 30 years from now, the accounts of victims of the Troubles will be at hand to contribute to a comprehensive and accurate narrative of the conflict" (McLOUGHLIN, McNALLY & MILLER, 2007, pp.135-136). [33]

It is interesting in this respect to re-visit the views of some of the researchers approached about the archiving and cataloging of their data. Despite the sensitivities involved, most of those investigators approached by the ARK project agreed on the need to have at least a record of the material that was out there available in the NIQA catalog. As originally anticipated, the NIQA project was more concerned with setting up a catalog of qualitative material on the conflict, to ensure that valuable data would not be lost to public record. This approach also left open the possibility to physically archive the material at some later stage, when this was considered safe. In this context, McLOUGHLIN and MILLER (2006) remind us that in the past some researchers, working on both sides of the political divide in Northern Ireland, were either directly targeted by paramilitaries or had some concern during the course of their fieldwork that they were suspected to be "spies" (BURTON, 1978, p.176; JENKINS, 1984, p.156; SLUKA, 1990, pp.118ff.; SLUKA, 1995, p.283; FELDMAN, 1991, pp.11-12). [34]

In their article, McLOUGHLIN and MILLER also discuss what they term "the 'who', 'when', 'where', and 'how' " (2006, p.2) that qualitative data is collected: how the background of an individual researcher can affect this process; how the particular time period and location, in which a research project is conducted, can influence its findings; and how different research methodologies can also condition the data produced. Whilst such contextualization should be the individual responsibility of any researcher, seeking to adhere to principles of academic rigor (in particular, allowing for the confirmation of a research trail), the case of Northern Ireland is arguably somewhat "special." Being part of an "us-and-them" dichotomy as a researcher is perhaps not unique to Northern Ireland, but it is certainly more pronounced in divided societies. Demonstrating this point, McLOUGHLIN and MILLER (2006) quote Claire MITCHELL's self-reflective position paper (SMYTH & MITCHELL, 2006) in which she alludes to her experiences of researching religion in Northern Ireland and being pigeon-holed by her interviewees on account of her own religious background. [35]

McLOUGHLIN and MILLER (2006) then write about their strategies and approaches, as archivists, of providing the additional context to the cataloged projects. Whilst this has obvious limitations, the NIQA project team has been able to devise ways to provide additional information which, in most cases, allows users to come to their own conclusions about the context of datasets logged in our catalog, and so to assist in its reuse without prejudicing secondary analysts' interpretation of the material. For example, McLOUGHLIN and MILLER (ibid.) suggest ways in which datasets can be cross-referenced with chronological information on the main ARK website, which would allow secondary users to gain a greater appreciation of how a particular dataset may be affected by the time in which it was generated, especially by the political events around that period. [36]

5.2 Ageism archive

The second section on NIQA is a genuine archive of qualitative research data, in this case an archive of audio-visual interview data collected in a pilot project on ageism. The ageism project was a follow-up study to the 2005 NILT survey. One-to-one in-depth follow-up interviews were conducted on the subject of ageism with ten NILT respondents who were over 50 years of age. Beyond the main aim to increase our understanding of issues related to ageism, the project had two further objectives: firstly, to gain a better understanding of the possibilities of enhancing data collection by using audio-visual methodologies in social research; and, secondly, to understand the implications that audio-visual methods would have on the use of such data for research and teaching in third-level education. [37]

The first critical point we had to address during the project on ageism was the issue of informed consent and confidentiality. The sharing of video interview clips basically means that the confidentiality of respondents cannot be guaranteed. Whilst it is possible to anonymize interview transcripts, and audio recording can be masked to some extent to protect the privacy of interviewees, anonymization in video interviews is not meaningfully possible. There are examples of other websites, which use personal stories collected in video interviews with people

recruited through systematic qualitative sampling procedures. [Health Talk Online](#), run by the Health Experience Research Group at the University of Oxford and the DIPEX charity, for example, have conducted video interviews with people affected by particular health issues. Depending on the consent given by interviewees, the Health Talk Online website presents transcripts of the interviews alongside the voice recording or video recording. In some instances the interview clip is that of an actor playing the part of the real interviewee. [38]

Being informed by some of the technical solutions of websites such as Health Talk Online, ARK developed an archive of extracts of audio-visual interviews that are focused on specific issues that affect older people; e.g.: job security and retirement, service provision and infrastructure for older people, volunteering, health and illness and fear of crime. In the case of ARK's Ageism website, the use of actors for interviewees who were uncomfortable with the idea of not remaining anonymous was not considered an option in this pilot project. Rather we decided to limit the access to the interview data to researchers and students in third level education. In consequence, this section of the ARK website had to be passworded and an application process for those who wish to access the data had to be set up. This was the first time that ARK limited access to its website in any way. Similar to the Health Talk Online website, the transcript of the interview extracts can be read whilst playing back the streamed video clip. The downloading facility of the images is disabled. [39]

The consent form developed for this project was relatively complex, giving participants the opportunity to consent to various levels of confidentiality. Most participants agreed that both the textual and audio-visual version of their interview material could be shared for research and teaching purposes in higher education institutions. [40]

6. Implications for Oral History Projects on the Northern Ireland Conflict

In 2005 an audit of storytelling projects concerned with the Northern Ireland conflict was conducted by KELLY (2005). The report identified a number of projects, mainly run by victims' organizations that were involved in compiling storytelling or oral histories. It was clear from this report and other information that the bulk of storytelling had been carried out during the later period of the conflict. There were however specific examples of storytelling that were undertaken early in the conflict. For example, following the killings on "Bloody Sunday" (30th January 1972) the Civil Rights Association set about recording, in written format, the statements of as many eyewitnesses as they could find. While these statements were collected in anticipation of problems with the legal process, they represented an early form of oral history connected with the conflict. [41]

The diversity of storytelling projects recorded by KELLY is a reflection of the fact that there is currently no central, co-ordinated, archive of oral histories. This, in turn, is an indication of the fact that there is no agreement between the various

groups as to the reasons underlying the conflict and who was responsible for the subsequent violence. [42]

A high profile example of a large-scale international storytelling project is that of the Shoah Foundation. To date this enterprise has collected over 50,000¹ testimonies of the survivors of the Holocaust. There were recent attempts in Northern Ireland to encourage the compilation of a similar archive of stories related to "the Troubles." Most people would immediately see an important distinction between the Shoah archive and the potential archive for Northern Ireland. In the case of the Shoah archive all those who provided their stories were survivors of Nazi oppression or those who assisted them—there are no stories by camp guards in this archive. In Northern Ireland the proposed archive could contain the stories of the relatives or friends of people who had been killed, or the stories of people who were physically injured, and, conceivably, the stories of people who were directly responsible for the same deaths or injuries. The proposed archive could therefore contain both combatants as well as non-combatants. It would be highly unlikely that former paramilitary combatants would provide any details of their involvement in the conflict that would result in prosecution, even if they would avoid any term in prison. It is clear to everyone with an interest in the topic, that any such archive would have to overcome many obstacles before becoming widely accepted. [43]

To date in Northern Ireland there has been no agreement on a single "official" monument or memorial to all those who died in the conflict. Even apparently benign suggestions of a memorial park, or a newly planted woodland, have not achieved much support. Indeed the local media carries fairly regular reports of existing memorials, to specific individuals or groups of people, being deliberately damaged in sectarian attacks. These kinds of attacks have a very long history in Ireland and predate the most recent period of conflict. Currently there is a "Day of Reflection," organized by Healing Through Remembering (HTR), which has taken place on the 21st June for the past four years. The occasion is supposed to be used for private reflection on the cost of the conflict. Those responsible for the initiative are still monitoring feedback on the impact of the day and presumably will decide whether to continue with it into the future. The lack of agreement on a common physical memorial to the conflict had led some to argue that a large-scale storytelling project might fulfill the role of such a memorial. [44]

At the beginning of "the Troubles" in 1968 there were older people alive who could remember, and had direct experience of, the conflict of the early 1920s. However it is probably true to say that many of the younger people involved in the conflict, even if they had read the history of the earlier period of "the Troubles," did not fully appreciate the scale of the suffering that was endured in the new Northern Ireland state between 1921 and 1923. If a large storytelling archive had been compiled in the late 1920s or 1930s, using the best recording technology then available, and people were able to relate their experiences of the conflict, and such an archive was used, say, in teaching history in schools, would this

1 USC Shoah Foundation Institute: <http://college.usc.edu/vhi/collectingtestimoniesworldwide/> [Accessed: October 15. 2010].

have made subsequent periods of conflict less likely to have occurred? While there is much power in a human story, particularly where the individual can be seen or heard, it has to be remembered that such an archive would be telling different or conflicting versions of the same events. The CAIN website does contain some personal accounts from the conflict. Most of these were previously published accounts. To date CAIN has not compiled a collection of oral histories, believing that local groups were in a much better position to make the necessary contacts and give the necessary assurances to the individuals involved. Of course, the main problem with the stories being collected at the moment is that they are being recorded to differing standards, with little or no metadata collected and stored, and with no consideration of long-term preservation. However, the main problem, if the aim of storytelling is to achieve an impact beyond the individual and group responsible for the compilation of the story, is that the vast bulk of the stories are stored in places where access is almost impossible. It is still not clear whether an initiative to undertake a comprehensive compilation of oral histories related to the conflict will manage to achieve sufficient consensus to allow it to proceed. [45]

In conclusion then, social researchers in Northern Ireland—whether they collect biographical interview material through empirical research projects or whether they are involved in the accumulation of oral histories and life stories—are faced with the predicament that they have to negotiate their data collection and dissemination within the context of the legacy of Northern Ireland as a society coming out of conflict. The time does not appear to be right yet for comprehensive storytelling on the conflict, as a common willingness to listen to each others' stories is still not evident. On the other hand, time is running out for the collection of the stories as some of those who have been involved in, and affected by, the most violent phase of the "Troubles" have grown quite old. [46]

As the pilot project of the ARK Ageism Archive has shown, the technical facilities to preserve biographical material and present it in an ethical way are in place. Perhaps, the task of social researchers and archivists for now is to encourage the collection of stories and their preservation in a format and location that the interviewees feel most comfortable with. One of the recent slogans in the Northern Irish political landscape is that of the "shared future." This is what the Government proposes people in Northern Ireland should work towards. Perhaps social researchers in Northern Ireland need to be patient and wait until people have internalized this idea of the shared future before they are ready for their stories to be shared as well. [47]

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Authors

Dirk SCHUBOTZ is currently Research Fellow with ARK and is based at Queen's University Belfast. He directs *Young Life and Times*, an annual study of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland. Dirk's main research interests are: research methods, particularly participatory and biographical methods; young people; sexual and mental health and community relations in Northern Ireland. Dirk has recently also been involved in a Framework 7 funded project on European identity (*Euroidentity*).

Contact:

Dr Dirk Schubotz

ARK

School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work

Queen's University, Belfast, BT7 1NN
Northern Ireland

Tel.: +44 (0)28 9097 3947

Fax: +44 (0)28 9097 3943

E-mail: d.schubotz@qub.ac.uk

URL: <http://www.ark.ac.uk/>

Martin MELAUGH is a Research Fellow at the University of Ulster and Director of the CAIN (Conflict Archive on the INternet) website. The CAIN site provides information and source materials related to the Northern Ireland conflict and politics in the region, from 1968 to the present. CAIN was first made publicly available in March 1997. One key aim has been to help individuals, groups and organizations to make their own materials more easily available on-line; these contributions are to be found in the many "associated sites" within CAIN.

Contact:

Dr Martin Melaugh

INCORE

Aberfoyle House

Magee Campus, University of Ulster

Northland Road

Derry / Londonderry

BT48 7JL

Northern Ireland

Tel: +44 (0)28 7167 5517

E-mail: m.melaugh@ulster.ac.uk

URL: <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/>

Peter McLOUGHLIN is a Lecturer in the School of Politics, International Studies and Philosophy, Queen's University Belfast. His research background is in Irish history and politics, with particular emphasis on Irish nationalism and the Northern Ireland problem. However, he now teaches more broadly on the subjects of: divided societies; political violence, terrorism and security; and research methods. He worked with the ARK team from 2006 to 2007.

Contact:

Dr Peter McLoughlin

School of Politics, International Studies and Philosophy
Queen's University, Belfast, BT7 1NN
Northern Ireland

Tel: +44 (0)28 9097 3109

Fax: +44 (0)28 9097 5048

E-mail: p.mcloughlin@qub.ac.uk

URL:

<http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofPoliticsInternationalStudiesandPhilosophy/Staff/McLoughlin/>

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